DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 447 992 RC 022 683

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| AUTHOR | Johns, Susan; Kilpatrick, Sue; Falk, Ian; Mulford, Bill |
| TITLE | Leadership from Within: Rural Community Revitalisation and the School-Community Partnership. |
| INSTITUTION | Tasmania Univ., Launceston (Australia). Center for Research and Learning in Regional Australia. |
| SPONS AGENCY | Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation, Barton (Australia). |
| PUB DATE | 2000-00-00 |
| NOTE | 11p. |
| PUB TYPE | Reports - Research (143) |
| EDRS PRICE | MF01/PC01 Plus Postage. |
| DESCRIPTORS | Community Development; Community Involvement; Cooperative Education; *Education Work Relationship; Field Experience Programs; Foreign Countries; High Schools; Leadership Qualities; Rural Development; *Rural Schools; *School Community Relationship; *Social Networks; Student Volunteers; Youth Programs |
| IDENTIFIERS | Australia (Western Australia); Intergenerational Relationship; *Social Capital |

ABSTRACT

A case study of a rural community in Western Australia examined factors responsible for the progress made in breaking down barriers between youth and adults and building community cohesiveness. Community documents and interviews with school personnel, students, and community members revealed that the high school worked with the community to build a number of school-community linkages, including involving the community in school decision making, introducing a work studies program into the senior curriculum, and introducing the state emergency services "cadet scheme" into the school. Although these efforts were funded initially by government grants, their success depended on key people in the school and community who capitalized on these opportunities through a leadership process based on the development and maintenance of relationships. Leaders within the school built relationships with community members and enabled these people to become leaders within their own community. As the relationships developed, mutual trust was built. As trust increased, community support for and sense of ownership of the school increased, contributing to the sustainability of the school-community linkage. Outcomes included increased self-esteem of youth; increased skills and knowledge among youth relevant to their community, resulting in greater numbers of youth taking up local employment and volunteer activities; increased leadership skills among local business operators; new sources of learning for the school within the community; and increased student retention rates. (Contains 16 references.) (TD)

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*University of Tasmania*

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# Leadership from Within: Rural community revitalisation and the school-community partnership

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**Introduction**

Recent years have seen an increasing number of rural schools within Australia and overseas playing an active role in the development and sustainability of their communities. This study, which is being funded by the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation, reports preliminary findings from a rural school in Western Australia dedicated to building an effective and sustainable partnership with its community. It examines the leadership processes involved in establishing and maintaining the partnership, and identifies outcomes for students, the school, and the community as a whole.

**Background**

Community development literature (for example, Kenyon 1999a; Heartland Center for Leadership Development 1987) identifies the development of youth and their active participation in the community, as well as a strong belief in and support for local education opportunities, as key factors in community development. Recent years have seen an increase in Government and private support for youth development initiatives. For example, a current nationwide project, looking at strategies to ensure retention of youth in rural Australia, is focusing on fostering collaboration between schools and their communities and on the development of school curriculum initiatives which allow youth to participate more fully in community life (Kenyon 1999b).

The focus by community developers on promoting school-community linkages is mirrored in the education and training sector. Recent years have seen the introduction in a number of State and Territory schools of a variety of largely Government-funded initiatives designed to enrich student learning by developing closer links between school and community. Some initiatives relate to both metropolitan and rural schools, such as the school-to-work transition program, whilst others specifically target rural schools (for example, the Country Areas Program) or mainly rural schools (for example, programs like Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness that address the needs of equity groups such as Indigenous Australians).

While increased levels of Government and private support have facilitated the introduction in a number of rural communities of a variety of school-community linkages, research suggests that leadership plays a central role in ensuring the sustainability of such linkages (Kilpatrick, Bell & Kilpatrick 2000; Johns et al. 1999; Miller 1998; Lane & Dorfman 1997). Leadership is viewed as a process of building relationships of mutual obligation and trust across community sectors, in such a way as to "enable" a wider group of community members to participate in the leadership process (Falk & Mulford forthcoming). Research notes that active relationships, which involve interactions that cross role boundaries such as interactions between the school institution and the business institution, have the greatest potential for

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sustainable community development (Lane & Dorfman 1997). The product of these interactions is social capital, which can influence the social, civic or economic wellbeing of a community (Falk & Kilpatrick 2000). Therefore, leadership which focuses on building social capital is a key factor in sustainable community development (Falk & Mulford forthcoming).

**Methodology**

This qualitative research uses a case study methodology. As this is a work-in-progress, preliminary findings only from one of the five communities selected for study are presented. In keeping with the case study methodology (Burns 1997), data were collected using three techniques: semi-structured interviews; written documentation from school and community sources, and observation. Interviews were conducted with school Principals, selected school teaching and ancillary staff, students, parents, and a variety of community members representing community interests including the viticulture and tourism industries, small business, voluntary emergency services groups, and local and State government.

**The community and its schools**

The study was conducted in the Augusta Margaret River Shire in south western Western Australia, and included the town of Margaret River with a population of 2846 (ABS 1998) and growing, plus a number of smaller communities including Augusta. The region is experiencing rapid growth in terms of its economy and population, largely as a result of flourishing viticulture and tourism industries. The pleasant lifestyle and surfing opportunities also attract many newcomers to the region. Whilst a number of families have been and are still involved in dairy farming, recent years have seen the sale of some dairy properties to large viticulture concerns. Both the viticulture and tourism industries provide employment opportunities in the region, although these are largely casual and seasonal. The schools provide some of the most stable and permanent employment opportunities in the community, while the region also supports a relatively healthy small business sector.

Locals describe the community as "eclectic" because of the diverse backgrounds, lifestyles and values of its population, including dairy farmers, viticulturalists, professionals such as school teaching staff, local small business owners and operators, environmentalists and alternative lifestylers, and the unemployed. Because of this diversity, conflict is inevitable; however one of the community's strengths is the way in which many of these conflicts are managed and resolved through dialogue.

The region supports eight schools: four Government primary schools, one Government senior high school, and three private schools. The focus of this paper is the Margaret River Senior High School, with an enrolment of approximately 600 students from Years 8 to 12 and approximately 50 teaching staff. Prior to 1995, the school catered for students only up to Year 10 level; students wishing to continue to Years 11 and 12 were bussed to the nearest senior high school some 45kms north of Margaret River. Still others left the region to attend boarding schools, often hundreds of kilometres away.

Despite the region's obvious assets, until as recently as five or six years ago it had a major problem similar to that of many other rural communities across the country – the lack of engagement of youth in the community and the subsequent loss of those

youth to the cities. The business sector, in particular, was unwilling to accept youth as either employees or even customers. The upgrading of the high school to senior high school status in 1995 was an important turning point in fostering greater linkages between the school and community. The way in which the senior high school continues to work with the community to foster youth participation in all aspects of community life, is the subject of this workshop.

**Findings**

***Factors influencing the development of the school-community partnership***

Once the high school gained senior high status, it worked with the community on building a number of school-community linkages, including:

- Involvement of the community in school decisionmaking
- Introduction of a work studies program into the senior curriculum, incorporating structured work-based learning and enterprise education
- Introduction of the State Emergency Services cadet scheme into the senior high school.

In addition, the school supported a variety of key community initiatives relating to youth development, including the formation of the Youth Advisory Council which is affiliated with the local Shire Council.

The planned introduction of these initiatives was timely because of the availability of funding and other support from both the State and Federal Governments, in line with the national move towards forging greater partnerships between schools and communities in areas such as school-to-work transition programs and the development of youth leadership. In addition, Western Australian Ministry of Education policy on parental involvement in school decisionmaking had been released several years beforehand; there had been a change in leadership in the senior high school, bringing with it a new Principal, and a VET Coordinator, and the Margaret River Business Enterprise Centre had undergone a major reorganisation and revision of its goals resulting in a strong commitment to youth training and development within the community.

These largely external factors, in the form of policy and funding, played a role in facilitating the implementation of many of the initiatives designed to build greater school-community linkages. However, the sustainability of these linkages depended on key people within school and community being willing and able to capitalise on these opportunities through a leadership process based on the development and maintenance of relationships. The leadership process in relation to three key school-community linkages, namely parental involvement in school decisionmaking, the State Emergency Services cadet scheme, and the Work Studies program for senior students, is examined in the following sections.

***Leadership processes in developing the school-community partnership***

*Community involvement in school decisionmaking*

Whilst the school had enjoyed parental participation through the P & C for a number of years, community members wanted a greater say in decisionmkaing relating to crucial areas such as policy and curriculum. School leadership also supported the involvement of community members in school decisionmaking. The catalyst for

community involvement was conflict over inadequate parental consultation regarding a proposed change to the school dress code. A representative of the P & C explains:

> out of that sense of frustration on our part there came a suggestion from one of our parents that maybe it would be a good idea if we could have a voice on the School Management Group to stop that sort of thing ... what was perhaps initially ... a point of difference became a catalyst for some very positive change.

This extract illustrates the nature of the relationship that developed between the school and parent body, in that conflict is not avoided but is welcomed as the first stage in effecting change. Both school and P & C leaders have put much work into building a relationship of trust and mutual respect, based on the shared value of the importance of strong leadership.

> There's a lot of mutual respect, we don't always agree, we've had some very strong differences but we respect each other. We respect each other's right to disagree on some issues. So I think the mutual respect that is between the two bodies is obviously for everyone's benefit ... there's no doubt that we both believe that strong leadership in any community is vital ... (P & C representative)

Relationships built through parental/community involvement in the School Management Group and the P & C were seen to be the catalyst for other school-community linkages. For example, community members of the School Management Group, who were themselves respected members of the community, used their networks of influence to 'sell' the benefits of structured work-based learning to the business sector and to encourage small business operators to become involved.

*The State Emergency Services cadet scheme*

The State Emergency Services cadet scheme is in its third year of operation in the Margaret River Senior High School. The scheme is not part of the school curriculum but is offered on an optional basis after school hours. Its continued operation depends on the support of parents, and of community members involved in the various emergency services groups in the region. The cadet scheme is coordinated by a school staff member who has spent much time building relationships both within the school and between school and community. Another school staff member explains:

> [Name of teacher] runs that program, now he's the one with the vision, the drive, the enthusiasm to make it happen, no community member would come in and make it happen within the school. So he's the key person there, but you know he's got the nouse to realise that he's got to get other key people on side so he's got our fire chief from the local district involved in that ... he's got parents involved in that, he's got other teachers, involved in that, he works with student services who have got people like our chaplain, school psych and our year leaders and because of that one key person, then engaging all of those others it happens ...

As these relationships are strengthened, individuals within the community's various emergency services groups feel comfortable undertaking a leadership role by

providing training to cadets. They also use their networks and links with other community members and groups to gain further support for the cadet program. The coordinator of the cadets explains:

> *Cadet Coordinator*: we have here a particularly good relationship with most of the emergency services ... our best relationship is probably and the most common was with the local SES ...
> *Interviewer*: so what has made that such a good relationship, what factors have contributed to that
> *Cadet Coordinator*: we've got a couple of individuals that believe in what we do here ... they've got a good relationship with our other officers, this is quite an active bunch here, and they've been really good at saying well come on in and we'll work together ...

*Work Studies program for senior students*

In designing the new upper school curriculum for senior students, school leaders made a conscious decision not to offer discreet vocational programs but to offer instead 'a comprehensive general education that would best prepare [students] for further study, employment, enterprising self employment and citizenship' (Gorham 1998). A Work Studies program was introduced, incorporating structured work-based learning, where senior students are mentored by local business owner-operators as they participate in a total of 120 hours of structured work experience during their school holidays, and enterprise education designed to foster entrepreneurial skills and attitudes in youth.

A close relationship between the Principal and VET Coordinator at the senior high school and the facilitator of Margaret River Business Enterprise Centre, helped to facilitate the introduction of the program. The relationship is built on shared core values in that the school philosophy to provide a 'holistic education using a whole-of-town approach, which lifts the self-esteem and confidence of all ... eliminating ... any investment in the "tall poppy syndrome"' (Gorham & Collins 1999, p. 46), is consistent with the philosophy of the Business Enterprise Centre which considered enterprise education in Margaret River as the responsibility of the school, the business community and the Business Enterprise Centre (Maidment 1998).

These key people worked hard at building relationships and gaining the trust and support of local business people whose involvement was critical to the success of the programs. Personal communication with potential employers and business people was an important part of the process. The school VET coordinator talks about the role of communication in setting up the structured work-based learning program:

> let the employers know that they are part of a process and we always talk of them as business partners and there's no such thing as we've decided to do this, it has to be a process of consultation and how would this go down.

In addition, to give the community greater ownership of structured work-based learning, a committee of school staff and community members from business, service and local government sectors, was formed. Its members were recognised as leaders in the community and had credibility with other small business operators. Using their networks, committee members were able to ensure the program was well received and

supported by the business sector. They also undertook the day-to-day organisation of the program, including the recruitment of new employers. The following committee member, himself a small business owner/operator, believes the leadership role of the committee was one of the strengths of the program:

> I think that is one of the strengths of the program that [an employer having problems with a structured work-based learning student] rang me and not the school, yeah, I think that just shows how strong the committee was ... and people recognised that the committee were very much part of running the show, that they could talk to us and that was as good as talking to the school.

The committee was so successful in 'selling' the benefits of structured work-based learning to employers, and in promoting confidence in the business community's ability to contribute to youth training and development, that it eventually went into recess. The sustainability of the program seems assured, given that the business community now has an expectation of ongoing participation in structured work-based learning.

***Outcomes of linkages between the school and community***

The overall outcome of increased school-community linkages has been the building of intergenerational trust within the community. The following school staff member reports on the findings of a recent study by the Western Australian Office of Youth Affairs:

> and this report now in 1999 ... says that the view of the town's employers of young people in the school is excellent. So if we've got a turn around in six years like that then something must have happened. And when we look at it I suppose, in our role of responsibility is that it's the work based learning programs, our cadet programs, and community networking and so on and so forth, and [the Principal's] insistence that the community comes into the school and teachers go out into the community.

More specifically, the current study identified a number of outcomes for youth of the school-community partnership, including the acquisition of skills in job readiness/awareness (which was an area of youth training that had not previously been addressed in the community), and increased employment opportunities. Other outcomes are increased self-esteem and self-confidence of youth, who felt they were respected members of the community whose opinions and contributions mattered.

Members of the business community, in particular, also reported an increase in their own skills and self confidence as a result of working with the school on programs such as structured work-based learning. For example, some small business owner/operators gained skills in leadership and management from the school, which they are able to utilise in the management of their own businesses.

Key outcomes for the school are the availability of previously untapped sources of learning within the community, as well as increased student retention rates which contribute to the viability of school programs. At the community level, employers are gaining employees equipped with many of the required skills and attitudes, sometimes recruiting their workforce directly from the school. In addition, the introduction of the

State Emergency Services cadet scheme at the senior high school has seen an increase in young people's involvement in voluntary emergency service groups in the region.

**Discussion**

In a space of approximately five years this community has done much to break down the barriers between youth and adults, the first stage in helping to reintegrate its youth into the community. The senior high school has played and continues to play an important role in the process of building community social capital, through a variety of programs and initiatives which foster linkages between the school and various community sectors, including the business and voluntary emergency services sectors. Consistent with the research (for example, Lane & Dorfman 1997), linkages that cross role boundaries are likely to contribute to sustainable community development.

The formation and sustainability of these linkages is attributable largely to a leadership process which focuses on building relationships, and this is consistent with research into the factors influencing effective school-community linkages (Kilpatrick, Bell & Kilpatrick 2000; Johns et al. 1999; Miller 1998; Lane & Dorfman 1997). These relationships have developed from a base of shared values between school and community about the education of their youth. Leaders within the school have worked hard at building relationships with community members, and have 'enabled' these people to become leaders within their own community (Falk & Mulford forthcoming). For example, members of the business sector and the voluntary emergency services sector work closely with the school in mentoring and training youth. As the relationships develop, mutual trust and respect is built. As trust increases, community support for and sense of ownership of the school increases, contributing to the sustainability of the school-community linkage. This is supported by other research into factors influencing the effectiveness of school-community linkages (Miller 1995).

The community demonstrates a strong focus on youth development and participation, which is identified in the literature as a key component in community development (Kenyon 1999a; Heartland Center for Leadership Development 1987). The school-community linkages described in this paper have increased the self-esteem and self-confidence of youth, and this is consistent with recent research into the outcomes of Vocational Education and Training in rural schools (Kilpatrick, Bell & Kilpatrick 2000). Youth are now better equipped with increased skills and knowledge relevant to their community; these skills and knowledge have developed as youth are exposed to and develop their own networks across community sectors. As a result, a greater number of youth are either taking up local employment opportunities, or considering self-employment or further study options.

Ensuring a healthy volunteer sector is an issue in most rural communities, and is a key component in community development (Kenyon 1999a). The senior high school's links with the community through the State Emergency Services cadet scheme plays an important role in this respect, by instilling in youth the importance of volunteerism, through first-hand experience working with the region's voluntary emergency services groups. This is an important contribution, given that volunteerism in communities is in decline nationally, having recently fallen below 20 per cent (Hope 2000).

The findings suggest that because of their increased skill and confidence levels, and increased awareness of the way in which the community operates, a greater number of youth are likely to remain in the community. They are also more likely to play an active role in the economic and social life of Margaret River, through paid employment (including self-employment), voluntary service, and increased participation in sporting and cultural activities.

**Conclusion**

The linkages between the youth of Margaret River Senior High School and specific sectors of the community, including the business and voluntary emergency services sectors benefit the school and community in a number of ways. However, these partnerships did not come about by chance, but through a carefully planned process of 'enabling' leadership in which relationship building and collaborative problem solving were important leadership tools (Falk & Mulford forthcoming). These findings have implications for the content and delivery of training and professional development courses for educational and community leaders in rural areas, and further research is this area is recommended.

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